

## Podcast Transcript

Version 1.1, 20 October 2017



## Alternative Sociologies of Religion: Through Non-Western Eyes

Podcast with **James V. Spickard** (23 October 2017).

Interviewed by **Sammy Bishop**.

Transcribed by **Helen Bradstock**.

Audio and transcript available at:

<http://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/podcast/alternative-sociologies-of-religion-through-non-western-eyes/>

**Sammy Bishop (SB):** *Hi, I'm [Sammy Bishop](#). I'm here with the RSP at SocREL 2017. I'm here with [Professor James Spickard](#), from the University of Redlands. So, thank you for joining us today.*

**James Spickard (JS):** It's a pleasure.

**SB:** *So we're here to talk about your newest publication: [Alternative Sociologies of Religion: Through Non-Western Eyes](#). Could you tell us first a little bit about how you came to work on this topic?*

**JS:** Well, every project is complex. And like every other scholar in the world, I'm in the midst of a series of conversations with various folks. Technically, I have a Religious Studies degree, but I'm trained in Anthropology and Sociology. I'm one of those few people who doesn't make a distinction between them, except historically. So I'm very primed, as a theorist, I'm primed to look and see what the underlying presumptions are of any way of understanding what a particular phenomenon is. And since I'm studying religion and going on the American context, I've been reasonably appalled at the kinds of things that the American context can't seem to understand. The first one of those that came up, during the '90s, was the inability of American Sociology of Religion to actually grasp experience in Religious Studies. I did my first fieldwork on one of the Japanese religions where the practitioners do something called [audio indistinct]. Which, crudely put, involves projecting invisible light out of the palms of peoples hands to clean the clouds off their spiritual bodies. And you can imagine why an anthropologist would be interested in this and I learned all sorts of wonderful anthropological things about it. But – and frankly I don't much care what [the ritual] was – but it was the thing that attracted everybody. And the discipline of Sociology of Religion said, "Oh no, no, no. That can't be right. Something else must be going on." There must be, you know, the deprivation hypothesis or some . . . crap! And so, it wasn't until a couple of folks did a survey where they asked a bunch of people

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involved with Asian religions, “Why are you attracted to it ?” And it wasn't the social life, and it wasn't connection with other people, and it wasn't deprivation, it was "Hey, dude. Something happened to us when we were sitting in meditation." And the discipline had no concepts for dealing with that. So [Mary Jo Neitz](#) and I wrote a couple of articles about that and put together a series of ways of thinking about that. And I ended up working on some pieces based in Navajo religion where you don't have churches, you don't have priests. You've got myths, you've got belief systems, but there aren't doctrines. But you've got these nine day and night ceremonies. And they were categorised as "symbolic", but they're not symbolic. I mean, why would you do something as symbolism for nine days and nights? It's based on the experience, it picks people up from one place and moves them to someplace else. One thing leads to another there. I began working on Confucian ways of seeing what's sacred in Confucian tradition. I was doing stuff on human rights and on the Confucian notion of human rights – which is a very different notion than in the West – and trying to get at that from the inside, following a series of contemporary neo-Confucians into this notion of the relation of self. The self is constructed quite differently in Confucianism than it is in the West. And this sacred relationships of . . . It's all about relationships. And the sacred inheres in the connections between people and the practice and maintenance of *Li*, which we call ritual propriety, but it's . . . The maintenance of the relationships that create the self and create the social community generates virtue. But virtue isn't individual, virtue is collective. So, it's a whole different way of thinking about things. So I get these two things going on, then I got interested in the work of Ibn Khaldoun from the 14th century who has a way of . . . he thinks about the concept of *Asabiyya* or group feeling. And it's a form of social solidarity that is centred, centripetal, it draws things to the centre rather than being boundary oriented. (5:00) But he treats that *Asabiyya* as something that is generated by kinship, but also by Islam. And so, you know, you've got these three things: "What do I do with this stuff?" And it struck me that there was a narrative here. There's a . . . well, where I end up – and I think the underlying place of this book – is that those are the three examples, but they're not exhaustive. The argument is that all of our concepts, including Western concepts and Western sociological concepts are historically and culturally grounded. That is, they arise out of a particular time and place. And reading [Manuel Vasquez](#)' article in [Religions on the Edge](#), which is the theme of this conference. Vasquez points out the way in which in sociology's origins, sociology treated religion as the “other” and so secularisation approaches are built into Sociology from the very beginning. And that was more articulate than I'd been able to get out of it. So, we have a beginning of a narrative. And I had already studied how religion is presented in American Sociology textbooks. And it is all about belief and organisations and morality and its all. . . it's isolated in its own chapter, just as Sociology of Religion is

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isolated in the discipline at large. So what was the default view? How was it created? How was it a historical cultural product, that then lets us see certain things really, really well, but *not* see other things, not see experience, not see relationships, etc? So that's the opening of the book. And then there's a chapter where I dive deep – I love writing this stuff because you actually get to dive deeply into things and read everybody in the world. And dive into the Confucian material. And then I take that and I've written a chapter where I apply it. And, what would a Confucian sociologist see about American church life? Or church life in Europe? But I'm dealing with the American case here. What would that sociologist see that we don't normally see? And the Confucian case is probably the most striking, that – despite the patriarchalism of China's religion and Chinese culture in general – who maintains the sacred relationships that keep the congregation together? It's women cooking church suppers. They're doing – or in the Black African American church it's called “kitchen ministry”, they've got a name for it, and it isn't always women, just women, in African American churches. And in Midwestern Protestantism it *is* all women. And there's a long history of church suppers forming the basis of the social church. In San Antonio, on the west side of San Antonio, which is Latina area, people are in fact nominally Catholic, but people don't really attend church very often. But there are women who will put on Christmas plays and they will do what they call a *promesa*, which is: if your nephew gets off drugs or something like that, you promise *El Nino Dios* that you will do one of these plays and that you will feed the neighbourhood. And the play people, the actors, come and they do the pastoral play, with shepherds and Jesus. And it's a religious event. But it doesn't happen in church. And so these women are not counted as religious in American quantitative sociology, they're just not. We miss all of this richness because we don't see it. So the relational notion, it wouldn't necessarily put women at the centre, but it *empirically* puts them at the centre – which is this lovely irony – and Sociology doesn't do that. Sociology ignores the role of women by and large. So, you know, then there's two chapters on Ibn Khaldoun and two chapters on what the Navajo, or what you would do with a Navajo approach. (10:00) And one of them outlines what the Navajo would do – how Navajo philosophy works and the notion of ritual as creating the original beauty, order its *hózhó* is the term, creating the beauty, order etc that was present at the creation. And at the creation it was done, in the myth, by thought and speech. Long Life Boy and Happiness Girl who take out this bundle, and they unroll the bundle and they do this sand painting. And that's what happens in the ceremony: they unroll the bundle, they do the sand painting, they recreate the original perfection. And people experience that connection. So then I take that and apply it. And this was actually an article that I had written in 2005, based on 13 years of fieldwork with a radical Catholic group that you can read the house mass that that group does every week, or did at that time every week, as a way of recreating the world, a sense of

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rightness, a sense of beauty, or of order in the lives of people who spent their time working with homeless folks, or sitting in at the Cathedral because the Bishop isn't spending enough money or poor people. Or sitting in at City Hall so that they will release [audio unclear] so that the poor people don't have to put their stuff all over the street. Those are . . . how do you recreate that world? Well it's the ritual that does it. And there's other things too, but the overall argument is that if we go to these other places and take a look at what other concepts are there, it's like if you're a photographer, and I'm a photographer, so I look at it: you hold the camera; you point the camera at something; you frame it, based on whatever; and you take a photo you get something, you see something. If you take twenty steps around to your right or left and take a picture you'll see something else. And so, what I'm advocating is that if we look at these other cultural, historical settings and places we can get notions, we can locate our camera in different places. The three I happen to choose are ones – I mean there are others, I suggest some in the last chapter, but I could only handle three. From the first article that dealt with some of this stuff to now, I think it's . . . well, it's been twenty-eight years. No, twenty-six years. Which is a long time, thank you very much! But the project really only gelled about eleven years ago. Anyway that's a long answer to a short question!

**SB:** *It's great.*

**JS:** So, where do you want to go next?

**SB:** *Well, one thing that we could ask would be why you chose to, or why you prefer to go to these other perspectives – such as the Navajo or the Chinese Confucian perspective – rather than looking for relational theories kind-of closer to home?*

**JS:** Well. You can get there by going closer to home. And when I first looked at experience, and wrote the first set of articles on experience I went two places: one, to the work of [Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi](#) – who's an American, or Hungarian American psychologist – who looks at the phenomenon of attention and how when you attend to something deeply the ego shifts and the experience of the ego, in that strict Husserlian phenomenological sense, the experience that you have of the world changes. And I went to that and I went to the work of [Alfred Schütz](#), particularly his [article](#) on making music together. And Mary Jo Neitz and I wrote a [piece](#) on that, her coming out of feminist theory and my coming out of whatever it is I come out of. But we're fellow travellers on this particular trip. And those were spots in the Western tradition where we could find it. And Schütz basically argues, and I think he's right, when you listen to music it's a polythetic experience. That is, there are multiple things happening, it unrolls in time and rituals unroll in time. You can't grasp a ritual just like you can't grasp a symphony

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in a set of words. But you have to play it again. And if you don't play it again then you lose something. And putting the two – Csikszentmihalyi and Shütz – together, what those rituals do is they focus our attention on different places. And how well you know the ritual . . . Csikszentmihalyi talks about this distinction between the difference between anxiety and boredom (**15:00**) If you know it too well, you're bored. If you don't know it at all, you're anxious. If you're exactly on the right spot, then your experience transforms. And so I'm using that to look at Navajo ritual, but I'm also using a Navajo theology to look at the Catholic ritual. Because . . . what is it accomplishing? It rights the world again, it puts the world back in order. And I think that's significant. Sure, you can get there in another way. Nobody has. Sure, you don't have to go to China to find out about relationalism. Nobody's done it. And my complaint, my criticism and I said this in my review of the book *Religion on the Edge*, is that people are laying out all of these critiques of standard sociology and then what they put in their place are really not very good understandings of symbolic interactionism, not even going to [Mead's \*Philosophy of the Act\*](#) where there really is some good stuff, but going back to [Goffman](#), going to things that don't actually produce anything new. So the wish is fine, but there's no delivery. If you go. . . It's like travelling. You go some place else. Here I am, an American, sitting in a British conference. People think differently – we have two countries divided by the same language (that's not my line, it's probably Churchill. I don't know who it is) But you begin to see things in a different way. And so I think it's important, for example, to go and read Ibn Khaldoun even though we don't have a cyclical . . . I didn't go to his cyclical notion of history – and Brad Turner at one point wrote that the problem with Khaldoun is that he has no theory of modernisation. Well, that's right, but that isn't where you go in this case. What are the concepts that work? And then realising and we think of him as an historian and he thought of himself as a judge on the Islamic tradition. He was trying to justify Islam, and a particular kind of anti-Sufi Islam which we might call Islamism today, based on the ability of that Islam to overcome kin divisions and create a larger community where people are tied together by ritual. Well, those are really interesting ideas. What do they illumine about a particular case that we wouldn't otherwise see? In that case, since I haven't described that one yet, I use that lens to look at the miracles of magic origin in Bosnia, in the Marian apparition in Bosnia, in 1981 and ongoing. And that was in the sociological literature as a religious experience, and as a religious event. And of course, it was. Then, ten years later, they have this ethnic war in that place, which is then described as an ethnic experience, and an ethnic event. Which of course it was. What's the relationship between the two of these? Is religion creating social solidarity which then becomes tied up with the ethnic line? because you can't tell a Croat from a Serb unless you ask as Bosnian what prayers they learned as child. Is it an instrumental way of killing people? In that case, I actually decide that Ibn Khaldoun

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doesn't do it right, because he has the centre-focussed notion of pulling people together. And the war makes it very clear that this was an edge focussed way of dividing people. but we still learn something by putting ethnicity and religion in the same frame, where they do not appear in standard sociology. Could we get there? Sure we could get there, but nobody's done it. I mean, it standardly isn't done. And so that's why I did this. Now that's reason one. There's reason two, which is: my previous book – I write slowly – is on ethnography and critique of un-reflexive ethnography in the study of religion. And it brought some of the material from anthropology into Sociology and into Religious Studies. So that's the notion of how ethnographers need to be aware of their own position in the process of doing their ethnography. (20:00) And one of the articles in there has eight different levels of representation in the ethnographic process. I didn't write that one but it's a brilliant piece by [Shawn Landres](#). Uh, I discovered there's a ninth. But, you know, these are the kinds of things we have to think about. Ethnography is now- it's sort of *de rigueur* that it's reflexive. We are not, in the historical cultural position of late nineteenth century France and Germany and the United States. We're in this sort of emerging global world where there're connections all over the place. It's after colonialism but it's not post-colonial. And that's particularly true because the post-colonial people are still doing anti-colonialism, effectively. But we're in a world where we have to begin thinking about it as not a unipolar world. And there's a long history in Sociology, not just American, and in Anthropology as well. We make the concepts, we export the concepts, folks in other places apply those to their own situations and frequently misunderstand what's going on. Not their fault. And there's been a counter-push to, "Ok how do you develop an indigenous sociologies?" and so on. And the ISA has sponsored some. Some of them are worthwhile, some of them are not. But we live in a world where we're beginning to have to talk from one another and learn from one another and so on. And so the second reason for going elsewhere is to remind ourselves that we're not the centre of the universe. Probably my favourite line in the book is the line in the last chapter where, you know: "Only men are allowed to imagine that there's no such thing as gender; only white people are allowed to imagine that there's no such thing as race; only heterosexuals are allowed to imagine that there are not these wonderful and glorious and multiple forms of sexuality; and only people living at the centre of the empire can imagine that the empire doesn't matter. So that's where we are. And here I am a white male heterosexual inhabitant of the empire and I can't forget that. And so what are the responsibilities? How do we move from that polarity to do something where we are all at least in conversation with one another? And I spent the last couple of chapters wrestling with questions of Orientalism, questions of cultural appropriation, and the questions of what is the epistemological grounding of what a global sociology would be. And my first title for the book, the one I sent it to the publisher with, was

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"Through Non-Western eyes: Towards a World-Conscious Sociology of Religion". And in many ways, that's the best description of what the book is about. The marketing department of course, said, "No. You can't do that. We want Global Sociology". I said, "No, that's white male, blahblahblah." And so we fought for a month, and two months, and then the editor came up with the title we have. I received a copy of the book the day after "alternative facts" became an American political meme. And part of me said, "Oh my God!" and the other part of me said, "Instant Karma for the marketing department." And yet it also does describe what's going on. Because it's not saying, "These are the only ways to do things," but "these are three models of what we *could* be doing". And there's [audio unclear] was dealing with the concept of [audio unclear], that had to do with Latina religious agency. And Nigerian, Professor [audio unclear] was dealing with some [audio unclear] concepts and there are some other people who've pursued these. And they're great. They're beyond me. I can't dive into all of those, I'd be doing this for the next forty life times. But the stuff is out there. Some of it's good. Some of it isn't. Some of it works. Some of it doesn't. Some of the stuff that I think works might not work as well as I think it does. Other things that I think don't work, might work better, but this is the conversation we have to be having. (25:00) So there's a sense that what I'm trying to do here is – well, as the subtitle [suggests], decentring the sociology of religion. Which is the subtitle of the Bender et al. book. It's the theme of the conference.

**SB:** *One final question. How do you hope the book might be used by other scholars or students?*

**JS:** I hope people will read it. You know. You always want people to read your book. And in this case, one of the reasons it's taken so long to write is that I try to write for . . . I don't just write for specialists. I try to have the prose be readable by people who are literate and interested in things. I actually write for my father, but he's dead. So I don't actually write for him. Somebody who can understand, who is not a scholar but can understand well-reasoned argument. So I tell stories. And other people will have stories. And if people . . . what I hope is that people will understand what it is I'm trying to do and then figure out ways that they might want to do something similar. Well, there a whole series of fellow travellers here, because I'm not the only person: Raewyn Connell's book, [Southern Theory](#) - it's a fellow traveller with that. And in that book she looks at a very Western question about the nature of colonialism. But from the point of view of people who have been suffering from colonialism. Not the same question but parallel. Mary Jo Neitz' work on Feminist Theory, [Feminist Sociologies of Religion](#) is a connected work. Meredith McGuire's work on [Lived Religion](#) is . . . . These are things breaking down the sort of standard modal of how religion works and looking at things through other lenses. Now I of course have criticisms of all of those – of things that they catch and things that they don't

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catch – but that doesn't matter if people read this, appreciate the stories, figure out, “Well how does this change how I think about what it is I'm doing, and what might I do differently?” That's great. And if people then say, “OK, I'm going to engage with people who are really coming from a fundamentally different place.” This is the ethnographer in me. I said that my first fieldwork was with one of the main Japanese religions so I had to immerse myself in a completely different way of thinking about the world. And that, I think, that's kind-of our duty at this point. Unless we want to ignore the fact that there's an empire around us, and I can't do that.

**SB:** *Professor Spickard, thank you very much for your time.*

**JS:** Sure. Thanks a lot.

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